

Congratulations to Staples over Benton County seat

Even if the Benton County seat never moves to Kennewick, you have to admire Fred Staples' tenacity.

The retired Superior Court judge has almost single-handedly kept the proposal alive. In recent years, the judge and his petitions have become a fixture at public events.

Now it looks like his efforts have paid off, and voters will finally get another chance to decide the issue.

Last month, the last of 3,486 pages of signed petitions calling for a countywide vote on the issue were presented to Benton County commissioners.

The signatures have yet to be validated, but Staples appears to have turned in more than enough to compensate for any that are invalid.

That's good news for Benton County voters. Another vote on relocating the Benton County seat from Prosser to Kennewick is long overdue.

The last vote was in 1984, and Benton County is hardly the same place. The population has soared since then, and most of the newcomers landed in the Tri-Cities.

Prosser has grown too. In 1984, the few jobs associated with keeping the county seat were a more significant piece of the local economy than they are today.

The burgeoning wine and agricultural industries pushed Prosser's future in a new direction. Losing the county seat wouldn't hit Prosser with nearly the same impact it would have 25 years ago. And many county jobs would likely stay in Prosser.

Since 1984, Kennewick has become the de facto county seat, even without a vote. In many ways, the deed is already done. About 80 percent of the county's employees work in the Tri-Cities and most Benton County business is conducted here.

County commission meetings are a glaring exception, and they are a good reason why voters should have an opportunity to decide on relocating the county seat.

The 60-mile round-trip between most commission meetings and the county's population center is an obstacle to public participation.

Even if that weren't true, maintaining what are essentially two county seats -- the official one in Prosser and the practical one in Kennewick -- probably isn't the most efficient way for Benton County to operate.

Staples has fought in the courtroom and in the court of public opinion to bring the issue to voters. He even made the county seat the central issue -- really the only issue -- in a bid to unseat Commissioner Leo Bowman last year.

Despite running on a platform comprised of only one plank, Staples garnered 47 percent of the vote.

Along the way, he attracted the attention of The League of Women Voters of Benton and Franklin Counties.

After studying the issue, the league concluded that Benton County had already exceeded its legal authority to provide services at a location other than the county seat in Prosser.

That was nearly two years ago, and the questions raised by the county seat predicament are still unresolved.

It would be unfortunate if the petition to put the issue on the ballot is unsuccessful.

The relocation to Kennewick has been under way for decades. It's time to let voters decide whether the county ought to complete the move.